PITTA

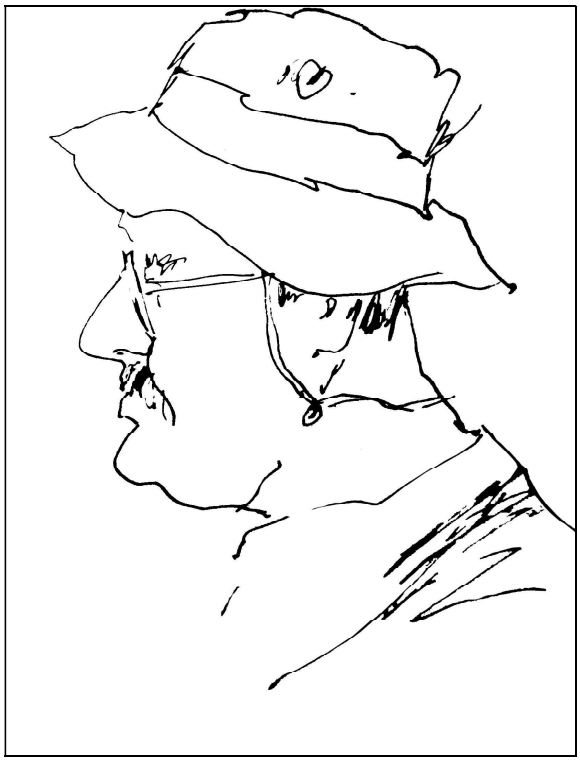
Newsletter of the Birdwatchers' Society of Andhra Pradesh
New Series Volume 12 Number 6 July 2015 (Special Issue)

Editors' Note

Some time back, we had informed our members of our plan to bring out a Special Issue of the Pitta to honour the memory of late Shri Siraj Taher (1942-2010), President Emeritus of BSAP.

We had requested you to send us articles, writeups, anecdotes, photographs and any other personal memories that you may like to share, about the time you have spent birding or otherwise interacting with Sirajsaab.

We present here the results of this endeavour, and hope that in some small way, we have been able to give tribute to a man who was one of the contemporary giants of ornithology.



S is for Shikra[1]

Aasheesh Pittie

In 2010 I lost two people who were very dear to me. They had studied in the same school, lived out their lives in the same city, had many common friends, at least one common hobby, and both died, within two months of each other, in the same hospital. Both were paterfamilias of more than one 'family' – philately and ornithology. Both had a tremendous impact on my life. Their journey into the sun was uphill.

[1] The title is a reflection of Helen Macdonald's visceral account of coming to terms with her father's death, through the numbing ordeal of training a Goshawk. I've borrowed and changed her book's title, here, for recalling my time with Siraj sahib has been no less wrenching. Too, he celebrated the shikra.

Siraj sahib was passionate about birds. That is how we met the first time, at a meeting of the fledgling Birdwatchers' Club of Andhra Pradesh [BCAP]. The fact that he was a generation older than me was never discussed between us, while everything else was. The Hyderabad he grew up in, the social culture of *tehzeeb* that made him what he was, has now vanished. He came to birds in the best way possible: First, pursuing them for sport, once a gentlemanly pastime, played to exacting rules; then swerving towards conservation, like so many of his enlightened contemporaries. I pressed him once, to tell me why he gave up his gun. He'd shot a sambhar once, a poor shot, he confessed. The injured stag blundered off into the forest. Raised in a tradition that valued a pricked conscience, he decided to follow the stricken animal and put out its agony. But the sambhar fought the inevitable for several hours, staying either unsighted, or out of range from its pursuer. When finally he caught up with it, the profusely bleeding animal was finished. The sight of the dead animal, and the realization that here was a living being that need not have died, had indeed tried to escape death, moved him immensely. With the bursting of its heart, that sambhar converted its nemesis forever towards conservation.

After a couple of outings together as part of the BCAP, we began to hit it off. To this too, there was a quirky angle, which showed the *apnapan* of those days.

One evening he met an old school friend of his in Riyazath Husain's iconic bookshop on Abid Road, A. A. Husain & Co. After the pleasantries and backslapping subsided, under the convivial eye of the senior Mr Husain, Siraj sahib asked him, "*Arre, ek bachcha aata hai hamare chidiyon ke* club *mein. Tu jaanta kya*?" In a city steeped in social niceties, the use of the "*tu*" was reserved for those that were dear to one; unlike the rough meaning it is ascribed today.

"*Apna hi bachcha hai,* Siraj," chuckled my father. Again that *tehzeeb* – not the grasping "*mera bachcha*", but the inclusive "*apna*".

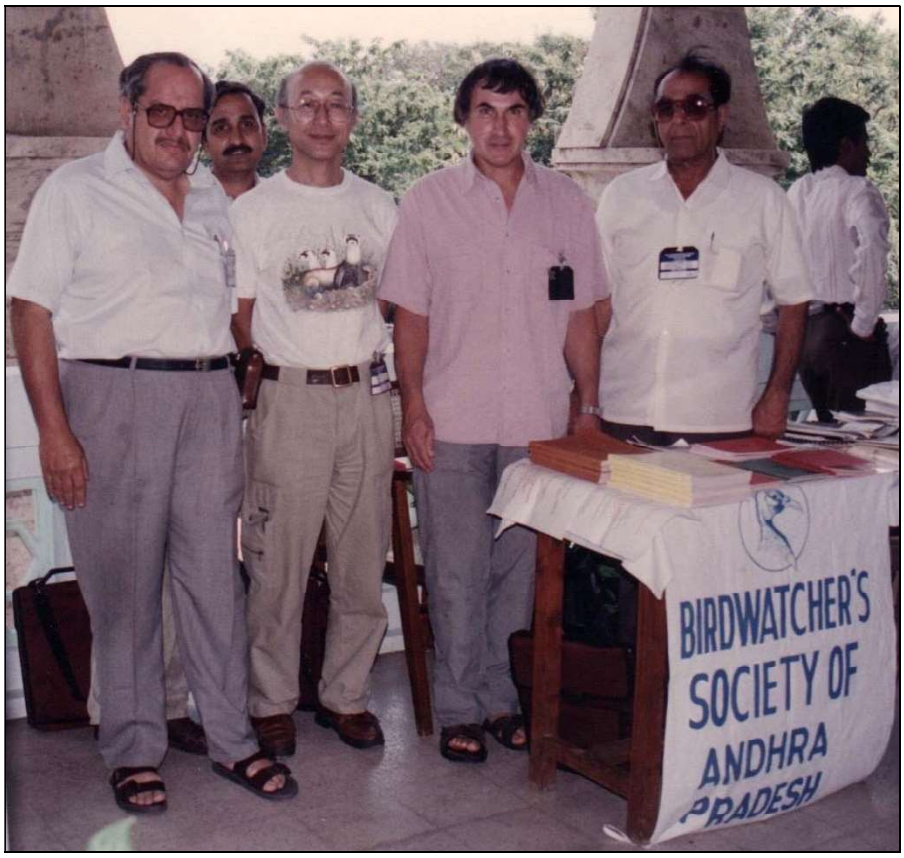
In the next outing, he stumped me with a loud "*Arrey, tum bolaich nahin ki* Murari *ke bete hain*". Seeing me taken aback, he chortled the bookshop episode. After that, my birding outings had no querulous or disapproving looks at home. I was going out with *shareef log*. Thus began a life-long association with one of the finest people I've known. In some matters he took me under his wing, in some we did things together.

That *shareef* quality of the man, I think, was ultimately what drew so many people to the BCAP, which was rechristened the Birdwatchers' Society of Andhra Pradesh [BSAP] upon its registration. The hierarchy of the organization was never apparent to any of the participants. Except for Mr Pushp Kumar, top gun in the Andhra Pradesh Forest Department, who was thus accorded a genteel deference by the elderly birders, the subtle unsavouriness of implied superiority, whether of rank or knowledge, never left its residue on any of us youngsters. Everyone travelled together in the Forest Department's jeeps, all walked to where the birds were, victuals were mutually partaken, and the day's count discussed later in a much-anticipated circle of friendship. Topical and irreverent banter, and repartee, were the norm. This was an exceptional illustration of the altruistic spirit of those who planned, promoted, popularized, and participated in this pastime. And to my mind, the single factor that contributed to the organisation's successful promotion of an undoubtedly new concept of outdoor activity for the citizenry of Hyderabad. Plus, who could deny that element of thrill, shrouded in the past of fondly recalled boyhood days, of a Boy Scout's revving adrenalin, of a golden nostalgia that tugs adults to another shot at nirvana? The wilderness, and its wildlings, does such things to men.

Every specialized activity has its own terminology, and ornithology was replete with enough to confound a polyglot; its lexicon spanned classical European languages, English, Sanskrit, and the immense mythologies of the world's cultures! This hurdle notwithstanding, our motley group soon cobbled together a bristling argot of nicknames, abbreviated codes, hand and eye signage, and often, a whistled mimicry of surprising drollness, pulsating with distinct onomatopoeic bemusement. Newcomers stood stupefied by this bunch of loonies telling

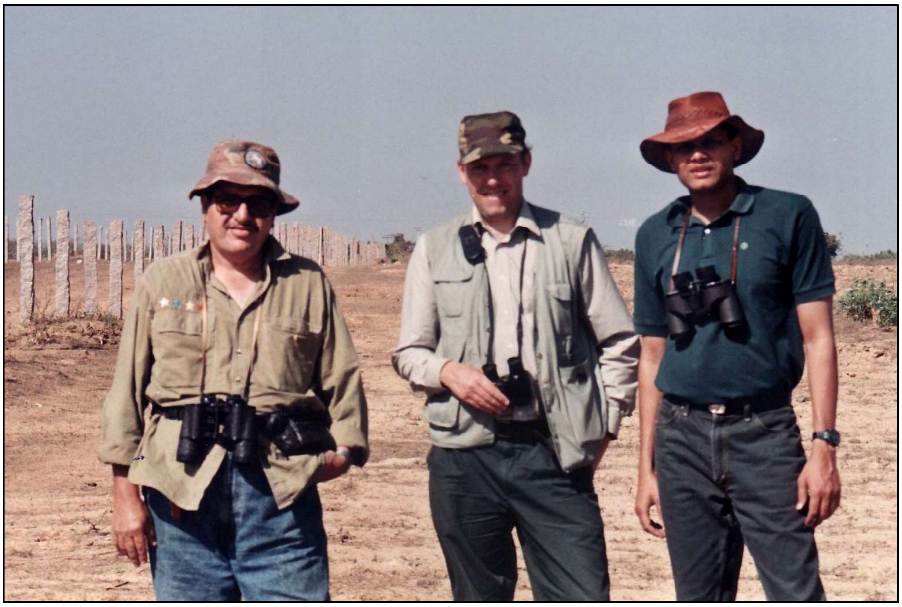
time on a tree while trying to locate a bird! Siraj sahib was privy to this notorious gang, and thoroughly enjoyed the perplexity of the uninitiated. Being accepted into the group was considered a rite of passage.

His sense of fun was legendary. It often kept in good humour a tired, flagging group returning after a day of slim pickings. A master raconteur, he spiced tea breaks with stories from vintage days. In turns becoming moist-eyed-sentimental for the *Days of the Beloved*, or rasping street-slang *Hyderabadi* in his baritone.



The BSAP 'pavilion' at the first Pan-Asian Ornithological Conference in Coimbatore, 9–16 November 1996.
L to R: Siraj Taher, M. S. Kulkarni, Noritaka Ichida (Vice-President of BirdLife International, and Chairman, BirdLife Asia Council), Tim Inskipp, and Maj. Ahmed Abdul Aziz. Photo: Aasheesh Pittie.

For Siraj sahib, every birder was special, and welcome to his home. I met many heavyweights of the birding world there, and cannot recall even one person who was not at as much ease, as he would be in his own drawing room. The city's birding lads walked in and out as if they were visiting their own homes. To me it was always a special place. I went there for all the reasons that a deepening friendship draws two people to spend time together. Our discussions ranged from ornithology, to social behavior, politics, the philosophy of morality, and ethics; the nuances of Urdu *shaayari*; the importance of art in comprehending the world; the unceasing turmoil that was the status of our environment; the way to take the Society forward – several ideas springing up spontaneously during conversation, which we worked on and made something of. But the deepest moments were the silences we lapsed into between words, ruminating, pondering, or simply savouring thoughts that rush in at the end of a satisfying flow of words. I always took away the comforting thought that here was someone who I could speak with about subjects that shone with clarity once the polishing strokes of give and take had burnished their cantankerous edges.



L to R: Siraj Taher, Richard Grimmett, and Aasheesh Pittie (1996). Photo: Aasheesh Pittie

The heady plan of collating our own checklist of the birds of Andhra Pradesh was cast during one such evening. Why could we not do it? It was the first step to more comprehensive ornithologies – but this was achievable by just the two of us. As often happens, the force with which an idea hits one, it also pushes out and lays bare methodologies for fructifying it in the same instant. I do not think it took us more than half an hour to decide our workflow and apportion our responsibilities. Subsequently, there must have been innumerable meetings to iron out creases, to enjoy quaint discoveries in published accounts from the past, to streamline every step so that both were on the same page with regard to content, presentation, citation, taxonomy, etc. But there was no major change; no rollback of methods; no U-turn on our road map.

Release of the *Checklist* in 1989, in the corridor of the A. P. Forest Dept. building.
L to R: Maj. Ahmed Abdul Aziz, Pushp Kumar IFS, S. Ashok Kumar. I am talking about the work,
a stack of which can be seen on the bottom left of the picture. Photo: Aasheesh Pittie.

Comparatively, the translation of the *Birds of Southern India*, by Richard Grimmett and Tim Inskipp (2005), into Telugu, was a minefield. Collaborations were imperative because he only had a good working knowledge

of the language, could be the ideal Telugu-speaking ornithologist, but was not proficient enough to take on the entire work himself. Translating the extensive lexicon of birding, into a language that seemed to have no specific, definitive words to suit scientific interpretations, had to be executed by a twin-nibbed pen: One, that wrote with bold hearty strokes, delineating the work; the other, with the fine point, working in all the telling details that illuminated the manuscript. I was the troubleshooter who tried to unclog detritus in the workflow, to ensure smooth progress. Not least of these was dealing with the names for the colours of plumage, "brownish-yellow," "blue-green", etc. Ultimately we did get our own Telugu colour palette! Siraj sahib worked hard and long at the manuscript, and may have taken it through at least six proofs, after, often nerve-wracking meetings with the translators. The fine pointed pens scratched away day and night, and I would notice fresh stacks of papers during our daily meetings. He had this thing for coloured inks and would mark up his sheets with differently coloured inks, each colour linking a unique chain of thought. He wrestled with extant Telugu bird names, which were invariably of a generic nature, and had the distinction of coining dozens of new ones. But it was mighty frustrating work, and often did I catch him in a reverie, absentmindedly sucking at the end of a pencil. The lack of a consensus, the engine that could have driven this naming work, rankled him. Invitees never bothered to respond, except a few, for which he was so grateful. Dialect, that verbal filigree of distinctiveness within a language, a culture, tortured him, till one day he realized the only way forward was to ignore it. One could not please everyone. When published (2007), it was a work that justified his sense of achievement, in that of his team, and in his pride that the Society was a co-author.

Siraj Taher speaking at the release function of the Telugu translation of *Birds of Southern India* (2005)
L to R: A. K. Malhotra IFS PCCF APFD, Asad R. Rahmani (Director, Bombay Natural History Society),
and Shafaat Ulla. Photo: Aasheesh Pittie.

Siraj sahib, and indeed, Pushp Kumar, worked with an extraordinary zeal to promote an awareness of birds among Hyderabad's citizenry, and as a consequence, highlighted the environment we collectively belong to. The media, both print and radio, smelled the potential of an unique angle to pitch stories, and people began to discuss birds, the urban environment, and even the activities of the BSAP! Birds have always attracted mankind, and when brought out from the realms of literature, poetry, art, or even mythology, into the ambit of casual conversation, they ushered delight, rekindled memory, nudged people to look around and notice the natural world. The quiddity of our surroundings during our growing up years is deeply ingrained in our bones, recumbent though it may lie as we rush about our busy days. But comes a moment when memory stirs, awakened by a petrichor sprinkled upon our passivity by people like Siraj sahib, and a delightful facet of the natural world is miraculously visible to us. Birds can charm the most indifferent of people!

If passion fuels altruism, the result is joyous. Siraj sahib's involvement with BSAP was such a phase of his life. Whether he was organizing a field outing; writing in long hand the next month's programme on *all* the post cards that he would himself mail at the post office; correcting proofs of the Society's publications; sitting with the patience of a Buddha for various permissions from a forest official; answering media persons, even when they came unprepared and posed prosaic queries; preparing environmental assessment reports of places he deeply cared about, like Kolleru Lake, and sending them to the concerned authorities on behalf of the Society; speaking to students; chairing symposia – it was all "for the birds", as though he had an oath in heaven!

Siraj Taher being honoured as the first President Emeritus of the Birdwatchers' Society of Andhra Pradesh (30 August 2009).
Standing L to R: K. Nanda Kumar, Umesh Mani, Shanti Mani, Siraj Taher, K. Bhardwaj, and Shafaat Ulla.
Seated L to R: Aasheesh Pittie, J. V. D. Moorty, Sushil Kapadia, and M. S. Kulkarni. Photo: Aasheesh Pittie.

And when his penchant for the living bird needed a rest, out would come his philatelic collection, with *birds* as its theme! He worked on it whenever he found time, and even displayed it successfully (winning competitions) in several philatelic exhibitions. The Forest Department regularly petitioned him to display it during their annual Wildlife Week celebrations, and he would willingly oblige. After all, it presented a fantastic opportunity to convert the visiting school kids to a lifetime love of birds, and philately!

He took great pleasure in the company of life-long friends, in the earthy delight of seasonal fruit, in the song of garden birds, in the pressure of his granddaughter's tiny hand around his finger. In a sense, he did see that world in a grain of sand. And when the end came in the month of January of that fateful year, he had a befitting farewell. A gentle evening descended; the annual *numaish* that he enjoyed with his dear Ayesha flung high its illuminated, rotating, giant-wheel; Mukesh's poignant, pathos-filled "*Jeena yahan, marna yahan*" wafted from that direction; and as clods of his hometown earth sprinkled the path of his onward journey, a pair of spotted owlets, his endearingly-named *Chakwa-Chakwi*, exchanged yarns inside a dusty tamarind.

Two months later, that other person, his friend, my father, too passed away.

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